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Legislature Targets Teen Traffic Crashes



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One public concern that frequently attracts legislative attention is a large number of motor vehicle crashes involving young people, particularly fatal accidents. This year's legislative session is no exception.

According to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA), motor vehicle traffic crashes are the leading cause of death for every age from 3 to 33. For 2002, the agency tallied 44,065 total U.S. traffic fatalities. Of those, 6,327 were youths aged 16-20, often involving alcohol. Infants, toddlers and young children also added significantly to the death statistics.

Consequently, the Connecticut legislature again this year reexamined state laws on child-restraint systems and new driver restrictions. As in prior years, the issue produced a controversial debate, weighing parental responsibility against government regulation of personal behavior.

The result is a system of series of motor vehicle laws, about which many citizens may be uncertain. Here is a brief summary.

For young drivers, new legislation, HB 5446, if signed by the governor, will require 16- and 17-year olds learning to drive under learner's permits to have a minimum of 20, instead of eight, hours of behind-the-wheel instruction with a parent or instructor. It also prohibits 16- or 17-year old licensed drivers, with few exceptions, from driving between midnight and 5: 00 a. m.

Currently, during the first three months a 16- or 17-year old holds a driver's license, a young person may transport no more than one passenger who must be either a (1) parent or legal guardian who is at least age 25 and a licensed driver, (2) person who is at least age 20 and has held an unsuspended driver's license for at least the preceding four years, or (3) licensed driving instructor.

The new measure, instead allows a new driver to transport during the first three months of licensure either (1) his parents or legal guardian, regardless of age as long as one is a

licensed driver, or (2) one passenger only who must be either a licensed driving instructor or someone at least age 20 with an unsuspended driver's license for the four preceding years.

On child safety seats, the legislature also passed a bill, HB 6660, to extend child restraint system requirements from children under age four weighing less than 40 pounds to children under age seven or who weigh less than 60 pounds. It also requires any child under age one or weighing less than 20 pounds to be transported in a rear-facing position in a child restraint system. Further, the new measure requires children restrained in booster seats to be anchored by a seat belt that includes a shoulder belt. This measure also goes to Governor M. Jodi Rell for her signature.

To say the least, these are complex issues. The measures are well-intended efforts of 187 Connecticut Senate and House members deeply concerned about the loss of life of even one young driver or passenger. These laws are similar to those adopted in surrounding states. More information will be available from the state Department of Motor Vehicles or my office. The new laws would take effect October 1.

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